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Customising learning programmes to the organisation and its employees: how HRD practitioners create tailored learning programmes

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Abstract: This study investigates how HRD practitioners customise learning programs, that is, tailor them to take into account the demands set by organisation and participants. A theoretical account of the relations between learning programmes and organisational/individual characteristics is provided. Results from an action-research project involving 13 learning programmes conducted in healthcare institutions are presented. The main conclusion of the study is that the seven HRD practitioners in our sample used few strategies to customise learning programmes.

Keywords: customisation; learning programmes; action research.

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1 Introduction

A lot of learning is going on in many organisations, and mostly, this occurs informally, with colleagues and supervisors during the preparation and execution of work (Eraut, 2000). One could call this employees' everyday learning, although organisational practice rarely refers to these processes as 'learning'. Notions of a learning organisation also have such ideas at their core: employees learn while they do their work and improve upon it. Thus, the employees learn while developing the organisation (Swieringa and Wierdsma, 1995). However, from the moment that learning is organised more systematically, it can be assumed that a learning programme is in the making. Supported by an HRD practitioner, a learning programme refers to a coherent set of learning activities conducted by a group of employees around a core theme that is relevant to their work (Poell and Van der Krogt, 2002; 2003). Organising such a learning programme brings new impetus to employees' everyday learning because they can also improve the organisational learning system at the same time.

HRD practitioners who set up a learning programme, have to consider both the situation in the organisation and the characteristics of the participating employees. Likewise, it can comprise training activities besides workplace learning, Learning programme can be influenced by the organisational situation in two ways. First, it affects the learning programme's content where the core theme is studied. Current work problems and expected developments can lead to learning initiatives. Second, the composition of the learning programme will be influenced by the learning opportunities offered by the organisation, *e.g.*, the available learning facilities. Besides organisational characteristics, the participants also place their mark on a learning programme through their existing competencies, their ideas about learning, and their learning styles.

This paper deals with the way HRD practitioners tailor-make learning programmes, and how they consider the demands set by the organisation and the participants. We start out by providing a theoretical account of the relations among learning programmes on the one hand, and organisational and individual learner characteristics, on the other hand. We then continue by presenting results from 13 learning programmes carried out in several care institutions. Implications for theory-building and organisational practice are discussed at the end of the paper.

2 Learning programmes and customisation: a theoretical exploration

The learning-network theory (Van der Krogt, 1998; Poell, 1998) stipulates that there are several ways to organise employee learning and probably, there are certain relationships between an organisation and its learning system. The core idea is that organisational dynamics are also similarly expressed in the way employees learn. Differences among organisations lead to different ways of organising employee learning, assuming that relations between organisations and learning programmes enable the formulation of hypotheses concerning customisation.

2.1 Organising learning programmes as projects

Employees learn a lot by simply working in an organisational context. Doing their job, informally improving it, or attending training sessions are common ways of learning for them. Such learning may be conducted more systematically and explicitly when several employees team up with an HRD practitioner as facilitator to form a temporary learning group that will collaborate to create a learning programme. A learning programme is created when a collaborative group of different actors undertakes a range of learning activities around a certain work theme during a certain time.

2.1.1 Project-based learning: three phases

Organising learning programmes can be done by using project-based work methods, provided the special nature of learning programmes is specifically taken into account. This is the reason why Poell and Van der Krogt (2002; 2003) developed a typology of project-based learning programmes (also referred to as learning projects). The typology comprises three phases: orientation, learning and optimising, and continuation; and are elaborated upon to describe four ideal types of learning programmes.

Orientation phase: from idea to learning contract

A learning programme commences when a person takes up the idea of learning about a particular theme with a group. The orientation phase focuses on getting people interested in learning the theme systematically and developing a basic plan to which they can and will commit. The group members draw up a (social) learning contract with one another that contains their mutual expectations. Also, arrangements are made regarding the conditions and facilities needed to conduct the learning programme and achieve the intended results.

Learning and optimising phase: from learning contract to learning effects

The ideas developed by the participants in the orientation phase are realised in the next core phase of the learning programme. People learn, in two respects, as they conduct the learning programme: first, they learn about (a theme connected with) their work; and second, they learn about organising the learning programme. Therefore, besides the actual execution of the learning programme, participants attempt to learn from their experiences and improve their joint efforts to achieve high-quality learning effects.

Continuation phase: from learning effects to a lasting impact

Employees' learning does not stop when their programme has finished, as work-related learning is a continuous activity. Participants try to ensure that the learning in their organisation continues in two ways: first, by giving fresh impetus to their everyday learning processes at work; and second, by improving the organisation's learning system based on the gained experiences throughout the programme. Paying attention to such continuation efforts increases the chances that, next time, a learning programme in the organisation will be better than the previous one.

2.1.2 Project-based learning: four types

A distinction can be made among four types of learning programme, differing mainly in the ways in which participants shape the three core phases (Poell and Van der Krogt, 2002; 2003):

1 the contractual, individual-oriented learning programme (liberal type)

2 the regulated, task-oriented learning programme (vertical type)

3 the organic, problem-oriented learning programme (horizontal type)

4 the collegial, profession-oriented learning programme (external type).

These four ideal types are briefly elaborated below.

The contractual, individual-oriented learning programme

This type puts self-responsibility and self-direction of individual learners at the foreground (Brookfield, 1986). These individuals create, more explicitly than usual, their own programme of learning activities. In doing so, they make use of the opportunities offered by the broader context of a learning group (Candy, 1991). Individual learners negotiate with their fellow group members and their supervisor about the needed facilities, *e.g.*, money, time, and support. The expected output of the individual programme is specifically laid down in a (social) learning contract. Participants can hold each other accountable for reaching their individual learning targets and receiving the necessary support to do that. This type of learning programme has many of the characteristics usually associated with action learning (Revans, 1971; Mumford, 1997; Marsick and O'Neil, 1999): organisation members learn in a group of like-minded people by solving individual real-life work problems.

The regulated, task-oriented learning programme

In this type, HRD practitioners and other experts – as consultants to line management – play a crucial role in preparing, delivering, and evaluating group learning activities. Careful planning, based on policy intentions and task analyses, is valued strongly. Such tasks are conducted in advance by the HRD experts who will usually take into account the possibilities and desires of the participants in designing the programme. This type fits very well with the training for impact approach put forward by Robinson and Robinson (1989) and with the ideas of Jacobs and Jones (1995) about structured on-the-job training. They believed that predesigned off-the-job training activities are supplemented with transfer enhancing measures in the workplace (Broad and Newstrom, 1992).

The organic, problem-oriented learning programme

This type sees learners operating as a semi-autonomous team, supported by a process consultant, collaborating to solve jointly experienced complex work problems wherein no standard solution is available. Oftentimes, the participants need to bring together a diverse set of (multi-disciplinary) expertise in order to come up with creative ideas or solutions. If supervisors take part in the programme, they do so on an egalitarian basis

with the learners or they act (also) as process facilitator. Organically working towards common output, on the basis of a collective mission and goal, is crucial here. This organic form of learning may look very similar to everyday work for the participants, but the context of a group programme urges them to make the learning more explicit than the usual. The problem-oriented type of learning programme draws on the early work of Argyris and Schön (1978) about organisational learning, which was later elaborated upon in Senge's (1990) work on learning organisations. More recent notions about communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) are also strongly reminiscent of such organic forms of learning.

The collegial, profession-oriented learning programme

In this type, a learning group consisting of professionals is inspired by innovative insights and developed new methods within their professional associations, that is, outside their own organisations. Oftentimes, participants in different organisations get together to reflect on their professional knowledge, insights, norms, and codes. Through the learning programme, they adapt their work repertoire to include the use of new scientifically validated technology, transferred to the professionals by institutes for research, development, and continuing education. This collegial type assumes that employees are reflective practitioners (Schön, 1983) and are continually building their expertise within the professional domain (Daley, 1999).

2.2 Learning programmes in organisations: the impact of work and employees

We have indicated that learning programmes can be organised in a variety of different ways. However, the actual structure and phasing of the programme depend on the characteristics of the organisation and its workforce.

2.2.1 Types of organisation and learning programmes

The literature provides two arguments between learning programmes and the organisation where they take place: first, the way work is organised and its impact on learning programmes; and second, the way they are affected by the existing learning structure and culture in the organisation.

2.2.1.1 Work and learning programmes

When it comes to the organisation of work, the differences are oftentimes between mechanical, bureaucratic organisations and organic, team-based organisations (Ellström, 2001; Onstenk, 1997; Doorewaard and De Nijs, 1998). Machine-type organisations with extensive task differentiation are likely to feature highly standardised, formalised learning programmes, whereas in team-based organisations, more organic learning programmes are expected to take place. The learning-network theory (Van der Krogt, 1998) draws on the work of Mintsberg (1989) to bring two more types of organisation: entrepreneurial and professional organisations (cf. Weggeman, 1997). Table 1 shows the learning programmes that are expected to occur in the four different types of organisation and work.

Table 1 Relationships between work and learning programmes in different types of organisation

Type of organisation	*Type of work*	*Type of learning programme*
Entrepreneurial	Individual work	Contractual, individual oriented (liberal)
Machine-bureaucratic	Task work	Regulated, task oriented (vertical)
Organic	Group work	Organic, problem oriented (horizontal)
Professional	Professional work	Collegial, profession oriented (external)

2.2.1.2 Learning structure/culture and learning programmes

The second argument, which is to expect relationships between organisation and learning programmes, emphasises the impact of the existing learning structure and culture in the organisation. These have surfaced over time, usually as a result of the concrete learning activities. For instance, when organisational changes are implemented, training courses are often provided, or to further their careers, employees often participate in educational programmes. In doing so, procedures and task divisions concerning training and learning gradually take shape and organisational members' beliefs about education and development become clear. It is expected that organisations differ in their learning structures and cultures, which affects the actual learning programmes that are conducted (Baars-Van Moorsel, 2003).

2.2.2 Employees and learning programmes

Besides existing work and learning structures, the employees who participate leave their mark on learning programmes in the organisation. First of all, their learning capabilities and beliefs about learning are relevant. Second, employees' prior knowledge, skills, and attitudes also influence the learning activities they undertake.

No general hypotheses can be stated concerning the impact of employee characteristics on learning programmes. However, it is possible to have expectations about the roles to be played by employees in different types of learning programme. The liberal type gives individual participants a very active role, *e.g.*, they have to form a picture of their own learning needs and opportunities as well as mobilise others to support them. In a horizontal learning programme, it is crucial to be a team player and learn together by solving complex work problems. The vertical type expects employees to follow a training programme designed by HRD practitioners and management. In the external learning programme, an externally oriented professional attitude is needed because colleagues within the professional community set the stage.

2.3 Customisation strategies of HRD practitioners

Learning activities and programmes are strongly affected by the existing work and learning structure in the organisation, as well as by the employees who participate in it. In creating learning programmes, HRD practitioners have to consider the specific characteristics of organisation and employees. Two general customisation strategies of HRD practitioners can be distinguished: differentiating in the programme structure and individualising the programme during execution.

2.3.1 Differentiation in the programme structure

In designing a learning programme, the HRD practitioner can build options in order to adapt to the organisation's specific situation and differences among participants. This strategy is clearly visible in regulated, task-oriented learning programmes. The key question here is how the programme designer takes into account the organisational context and participant characteristics in the programme structure and planning.

2.3.2 Individualisation during programme execution

Both the HRD practitioner and the participants can adjust the programme during execution in order to correspond with organisational and employee characteristics. The core issue in this strategy is, as all parties together realise learning activities, how does the HRD practitioner make room for unexpected developments and newly acquired insights during programme execution? Three types of learning programme feature this strategy, be it each with a different emphasis. In the contractual, individual-oriented type, individual participants are responsible for customising the programme to their needs as it unfolds. The organic, problem-oriented learning programme places the responsibility on progress and participation, with the learning group working as a team. In the collegial, profession-oriented type, there is a strong emphasis on the externally directed, professional bond within the learning group.

2.4 Research questions

Although customisation is a term often used in HRD practice, little is known about the exact way in which HRD practitioners (can) deliver tailored learning programmes. Therefore, the main question in this study is how HRD practitioners customise learning programmes. The investigation is targeted at their activities in creating work-related learning programmes. Two research questions need to be answered:

1 How do HRD practitioners tailor learning programmes to individual learners?

2 How do HRD practitioners tailor learning programmes to the organisation where they take place?

3 Research methods

3.1. Research design

The study was set up as an action-research project in a collaboration of researchers with HRD practitioners from the healthcare sector. Its explicit aim was to use joint reflection on the practices of the HRD professionals to improve their self-understanding and to broaden the researchers' insight into the customisation strategies employed by HRD practitioners, in a continuous mutual exchange process. The healthcare sector was chosen because it was assumed that the broad nature of its primary processes could yield a wide range of learning-programme types. In order to facilitate comparisons,

participant selection focused as much as possible on the primary work process of the organisation as opposed to its management layers. In selecting learning programmes for the study, the emphasis is on the participants around the higher vocational education level. Two learning-programme cases were selected for each HRD practitioner, in order to establish whether the customisation strategies were bound more to their person or to their situation.

The analysis of separate cases focused on the characteristics of the learning programmes designed by all HRD practitioners and on the elements of their customisation strategies, as far as they could isolate the latter in a reflection session held afterwards. An analysis across cases was performed to relate characteristics of work and learning programmes to the customisation strategies employed by the HRD practitioners.

3.2 An action-research project in four phases

The action-research project took place in four phases: selection, description, analysis, and reflection.

3.2.1 Selecting the participants and learning programmes

Two learning groups, consisting of HRD practitioners, were established. Snowball sampling was used to find HRD practitioners from the healthcare sector who worked with employees at least at the secondary vocational education level. Potential participants were asked to take part in an action-research project-cum-learning programme on customisation strategies. Eventually a useful and complete data set was acquired from seven participants, of which six were men. They worked as HRD practitioners in large (psychiatric) hospitals, and in medium-sized nursing homes and institutes for home care or for mentally handicapped people. Most participants were very-well informed within the healthcare sector and had extensive experience with educational consultancy and training. Two introduction sessions were held with the participants at the start of the study in order to familiarise them with theory about learning programmes and customisation.

3.2.2 Describing the learning programmes conducted

An especially developed checklist (‘Customised Learning-Programs Checklist’: CLPC, see below) was used to interview each participant twice about two different recent learning programmes that they had organised. Useful learning programmes had a core theme to do with the quality of care or service and lasted at least a month with two plenary sessions. One participant had only one useful learning programme, accounting for a total number of 13 cases on which the analysis was based. In total, five researchers were involved in doing the interviews, including an initial analysis, operating in ever changing pairs. Table 2 contains a general overview of the cases.

Table 2 HRD practitioner, learning-programme theme, and participants and organisation per case

Case	*HRD practitioner*	*Learning-programme theme*	*Participants and organisation*
1	Ed	Methodical treatment	Community supervisors in an institution for problem youths
2	Ed	Therapeutic action	Community supervisors in a residence for youth assistance
3	Harry	Systems methodology	Nurses in a psychiatric institution
4	Harry	Client participation	Nurses in a psychiatric institution
5	Jacco	Restricted actions	Intensive-care nurses in a hospital
6	Jacco	Thorax draining	Nurses in a hospital
7	Johan	Day-care improvement	Activity coaches in an institution for mentally handicapped
8	Johan	Supervisor-client collaboration	Community supervisors in an institution for mentally handicapped
9	Pascal	Respectful treatment	Helpers, attendants, and nurses in a nursing home
10	Pascal	Vision development	All employees of a nursing home
11	Trudy	Networked care	Managers and employees of four nursing homes
12	Trudy	Client allocation	Managers in an institution for home care
13	Uri	Doing research	Nurses in a hospital

3.2.3 Analysing the learning programmes described

During the interviews, the researchers summarised the answers of the participants at the end of each separate section of the CLPC to check whether their interpretations fitted with the intentions of the participants. The interview's tape recordings, full transcripts, interview notes, and the CLPC were used to make a four- to six-page summary of each interview. This was sent to the participants for verification and additions, together with the version of the CLPC that was completed during the interview. All 13 summarised case descriptions were returned to the researchers with corrections. These corrected versions were used for the initial case analyses, which were done by different pairs of researchers for each learning-programme case, using the N-Vivo software package for qualitative analysis. An interpretation and diagnosis were made for each learning programme in terms of the presented typology. All 13 case analyses were discussed and commented on by the other three researchers in two or three rounds, leading to a number of changes in the interpretation of some cases. The analysis was aimed at gathering information about preselected categories, although an effort was made as well to find 'new' customisation strategies beyond the ones already singled out. At the end of this phase, the individual case analyses were used by the HRD practitioners as input for a learning programme and for a comparative multiple case analysis that was discussed with the participants during their last meeting.

3.2.4 Reflection on the learning programmes and case analyses

The descriptive and analytic phases of this action-research project contained some activities that could also encourage HRD practitioners' learning about the organisation of learning programmes. In the final reflection phase, this learning was intensified by forming two learning groups. In this phase, the action-learning project consisted of four workshops and reflective discussions on the backgrounds of HRD practitioners' choices in their respective cases. The researchers and other participants gave individual HRD practitioners suggestions to improve the way they organise learning programmes. The action-learning project ended after the participants had used the CLPC to improve an existing learning programme, or design a completely new one, from their own work practice. Participants were invited to think about how to continue the action-learning project individually in their own organisations. A final meeting with all HRD practitioners was held to evaluate the action-learning project for learning effects and its impact on their work situation.

3.3 The Customised Learning-Programs Checklist (CLPC)

Before the action-research project took place, the typology of learning-programmes presented above was used to design a draft of the Customised Learning-Programs Checklist. This draft was tested for its interpretive power in interviews with six HRD practitioners (not the same group) and afterwards, it was adapted accordingly. During the action-research project, the CLPC was not only employed to guide the interviews, but it has also yielded many concrete ideas for customising learning programmes (see Poell and Van der Krogt, 2003). HRD practitioners can utilise these to determine their extent and how they operationalise the vast array of possible customisation activities. It also provides them with a range of alternative ways to tailor their learning programmes to the organisation and its employees.

As an interview guide, the CLPC contains 52 open questions spread across five categories. First, there are 14 questions about the organisational context where the learning programme took place. The core of the interview is about the activities of the HRD practitioner and the learning-programme participants in the orientation (13 questions), learning and optimising (13 questions), and continuation phase (eight questions). The final category comprises four questions concerning the customisation strategy of the HRD practitioner. The completion time in the 13 cases ranged from an hour and a half to two-and-a-half hours. Half of this time was usually needed to get a general picture of the learning programme in its organisational context, while the other half was used to complete the CLPC by basing it on the information provided with some specific additional questions.

4 Results

This section has two main parts. First, the structure of the 13 learning-programme cases is discussed in relation with the type of work conducted (cf. Table 1). After that, some illustrations from the reflection sessions are provided of how these HRD practitioners customised their learning programmes and which problems they ran into.

4.1 Learning programmes and the organisation of work

The main results from the analysis of the 13 cases are presented in Table 3. The most striking result is that all learning programmes had at least a vertical component, meaning that they were, to a large extent, prestructured by the HRD practitioner and mainly task-oriented. The majority of cases (Nos. 1, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, and 13) even had vertical characteristics only. Four of the remaining cases showed a vertical-horizontal hybrid structure (2, 6, 11, and 12), with some organic, problem-oriented elements within the prestructured, task-oriented framework. There is one vertical-liberal case (No. 7) with some unstructured and individual-oriented elements and one vertical-liberal-external hybrid (No. 3) with a number of collegial, profession-oriented elements also.

Table 3 Work type, learning-programme type, and customisation per case

	Case												
	1	*2*	*3*	*4*	*5*	*6*	*7*	*8*	*9*	*10*	*11*	*12*	*13*
Work type													
Individual	x		x	x		x		x					
Task	–X	*X*	x	x	x	*X*	*X*	*X*	*–X*	*X*	*X*	–X	x
Group		x					x				x		
Professional	x		x	x	x		x						
Learning-programme type													
Liberal			x				x						
Vertical	*X*	x	*X*	*X*	*X*	*X*	*X*	*X*	*X*	*X*	*X*	*X*	*X*
Horizontal		x				x					x	x	
External			x										
Differentiation in programme design	o	o	o	o			o	o	o	oo		o	o
Individualisation in program execution		o	o				o		o		oo	ooo	

Note: Legend for work type and learning-programme type:
x = characteristic in case
X = dominant type for case
–X = characteristic in case, however unsystematic
Legend for customisation: blank = none
o = very little
oo = to some extent
ooo = extensive customisation

The work in all 13 cases was predominantly task-based, that is, much shop floor activity was directed from the top with relatively little employee autonomy. Jobs were often narrow, split up into sub-tasks, and subject to standard protocols. Incidentally, in three cases, this type of work was not functioning very systematically, in the sense that key work procedures were not well executed. Four cases (9, 10, 12, and 13) were characterised purely by task work, while the other nine were hybrid forms in several combinations. Elements of professional work were found in five cases (1, 3, 4, 5, and 7),

similar with five cases in individual work (1, 3, 4, 6, and 8), and group work in three organisations (2, 7, and 11).

Without performing a statistical analysis, comparing the respective columns in Table 3 shows rather clearly that a relationship exists between types of learning programme and work. To illustrate this, all cases contain the main elements of regulated, task-oriented (vertical) learning programmes as well as key features of task work. However, no one-on-one relationship was found, in that, relatively fewer external and liberal elements were found in learning programmes than could be expected had there been a direct relation with the professional and individual work types.

4.2 Reflection on customisation by HRD practitioners in learning programmes

The final phase of the action-learning project consisted of two reflection sessions with HRD practitioners which focused, besides on discussing the analyses of the learning programmes in their work context, on further analysis of the customisation strategies in use. The main result of this exercise was that HRD practitioners make little explicit use of customisation strategies (see the last two rows in Table 3). Although they do have implicit images of the characteristics of work and learners in mind, these are scarcely taken into account in organising learning programmes.

Although differentiation in the design of the programme structure occurred in ten of the 13 cases, this happened only to a limited extent. Individualisation during the execution of the learning programme takes place even more rarely, occurring, to a limited extent, only in six cases. The only case where explicit and extensive attention is paid to customisation (No. 12) is a learning programme targeted at first-line managers, where the work has rather different characteristics compared to the shop floor. All in all, the repertoire of customisation strategies used by these seven HRD practitioners turns out to be quite limited.

To illustrate the customisation strategies that surfaced, a number of examples from the interviews follow. *Differentiation* in the design of the programme structure occurred, first, through *learning needs and task analyses* (*e.g.*, analysing a work problem with the participants, then discussing with them what they should learn as a result). A second strategy in this connection was taking into account the *learning styles* of participants (*e.g.*, 'Nurses are clearly doers, they have a very practical orientation,' therefore use real-life cases and emphasise action throughout the learning programme). Third, differentiation upfront was achieved through a *flexible programme design* (*e.g.*, use parallel groups meeting at different days of the week, so that individual participants can attend when they please). A fourth strategy is related to transfer-enhancing measures (*e.g.*, encourage several people from one department to take part, including the head; pay attention to management processes besides shop-floor learning).

Three main categories of *individualisation* during the execution of the learning programme were found. First, *being flexible during the programme* (*e.g.*, open a help-desk telephone for specific questions from individual participants at the moment when they need an answer). The second strategy was *facilitating self-directed learning* (*e.g.*, encourage participants to attend a national conference on the same topic, so that they can keep up). Finally, HRD practitioners mentioned examples of the

individualisation strategy by *continuous adaptation* of the learning programme (*e.g.*, by establishing a meeting's first assignment only, leaving further proceedings dependent on the group and the situation at hand).

Other than these examples, this article does not account all customisation activities employed by the seven HRD practitioners (a full overview will appear in Poell and Van der Krogt which is being prepared). Although some examples of customisation strategies were found among these seven HRD practitioners, the repertoire in this area was far from extensive. Paying explicit attention to the characteristics of the organisation and the participants in organising learning programmes happened in only few cases. The final section of this paper deals with the implications of these findings.

5 Conclusions and perspectives

This study has presented an action-research project conducted with seven HRD practitioners, aimed at investigating how they consider the characteristics of work and learners in organising learning programmes. These HRD practitioners were found to give a reasonable amount of attention to different designs of the learning programme for the participants. This mostly took the shape of taking into account transfer enhancing measures and different learning styles. Different types of learning programme emerged as a result of this, also based on the particular beliefs about learning that differed from one HRD practitioner to the other. Despite such diversity, the prestructured task-oriented (vertical) learning programme was a rather dominant type in most cases. The HRD practitioners in our sample seemed to employ very few individualisation strategies during the execution of their programmes, *e.g.*, continuous adaptation and facilitating self-directed employee learning. The programmes were rarely adjusted on the basis of progressive insight. All in all, these HRD practitioners used few explicit customisation strategies.

The HRD practitioners all tended to use their own individual method to organise a learning programme, an idiosyncratic system that usually remains implicit unless there are action researchers around. Nevertheless, most individual approaches seemed to be based on an underlying means-end rationality that has been rather dominant in HRD literature to legitimise training efforts (Robinson and Robinson, 1989; Jacobs and Jones, 1995; Swanson and Holton, 1999). Clearly, the HRD practitioners in our sample initially embraced the assignment and problem definition of management, leading to a quite vertical, top-down approach. Within that framework, they then tried to negotiate some room for learning-programme elements that were more in line with their own professional beliefs. In practice, this pointed to learning activities such as self-direction and teamwork, which are associated with the more liberal and horizontal types of programme (cf. Poell *et al.*, 2003). Arguably, then, more effort is spent on tuning the learning programme to the organisation than there is to taking into account learner characteristics.

The major conclusion of this study is that the HRD practitioners in our sample used few explicit customisation strategies in organising learning programmes. Obviously, the limitations of the present study have to be taken well into account. Its empirical base was restricted to 13 cases and seven participants, all working in the healthcare sector. On the other hand, the action-research project at the core of the study was very intensive and well-suited for an in-depth investigation of the customisation strategies employed by

HRD practitioners. Also, the findings of the present study agree with a number of other studies that dealt with systematic learning efforts in organisations. For example, Overduin *et al*. (2002) concluded that HRD departments in organisations used few of the systematic practices propagated by the performance approach. Similarly, Sels *et al*. (2001) found that very few of the elaborate methods for training design from the HRD literature were used in practice. Weggeman (2000) concluded that few organisations managed knowledge systematically. In a longitudinal study, Kieft and Nijhof (2000) found that promising notions like learning organisations were hardly encountered in organisational practice. Instead, HRD practitioners still seemed to devote most of their time to training delivery, with their own particular beliefs and insights directing such efforts. In organisational practice, a systematic approach to organising learning programmes that goes beyond the individual action repertoire of the HRD practitioner appears to be far from widespread as yet.

Where to go next for promising research avenues? Three general remarks must be made before this question can be answered. First, a rather constant finding in empirical HRD research is that theoretical concepts find limited resonance in practice. The theory-practice gap in HRD seems rather wide. Much of the thinking in the field offers little assistance for practitioners to express their everyday actions in words, let alone to give these some more direction. A second observation is that organisations pay far less explicit attention to training and learning than what is assumed in HRD literature. This call for modesty should be a crucial starting point from which only small steps away can be taken. Thus, it should be clear that employees and managers oftentimes are unwilling to invest as much in training and learning as many HRD practitioners desire. Moreover, their views and interests in the arena of training and learning can vary widely. Third, explicit and systematic attempts to organise learning programmes seem rather rare, thus severely limiting the possibilities of studying the underlying dynamics and processes. Perhaps we should accept that training and learning cannot be easily subjected to traditional concepts of organising and controlling.

The above considerations raise the question of learning programmes' value. Everyday learning is everywhere and probably will always be, but its further systematisation gets scant attention from employees, managers, and even, as the present study suggests, from HRD practitioners. The latter seem to fall back on their implicit action repertoire, which is usually strongly biased by traditional training-design approaches. Although many in HRD underwrite the importance of alternative approaches to learning and ways to fully realise potential, including workplace learning and the integration of work and learning, much is still unclear. From an effectiveness perspective, this is problematic, because the impact of learning programmes, as seen in the cases, is small as a result of the lack of optimising and continuation during execution.

The question arises if the movement from training to learning, characterised in much of the HRD literature over the last decade, has been very successful. Besides the current study, other studies have also concluded that the impact of the HRD practitioner is very limited (*e.g.*, Nijhof, 2004; Tjepkema *et al*., 2002). Managers and employees are far powerful actors when it comes to learning in organisational and work contexts (cf. Van der Krogt, 2002). HRD practitioners can attempt to create a coherent set of learning activities within the boundaries of a predesigned programme. However, it seems illusionary to also want to change the work and organisational context, which appears to be restricted to managers and employees.

If HRD practitioners have little impact in practice on employee learning and on the work context where everyday learning takes place, their challenge is to create learning programmes that take into account that context to the best possible extent. They can try to find out the normal ways in which these core actors learn (implicitly) from work and build a tailored learning programme based on that. This involves not only differentiation in the design of the programme structure, but also leaving room along the way for adjustment, employee self-direction, and flexibility in programme execution.

Although the latter customisation strategies did not often feature in the present study, their illustrations show that there is a range of possible ways to bring some more system ánd customisation to the interventions of HRD practitioners (cf. de Caluwé and Vermaak, 1999): through needs and work analyses (Swanson, 1994), by taking into account different employee learning styles (Riding and Sadler-Smith, 1997), through transfer enhancing measures (Robinson and Robinson, 1989; Simons, 1990; Holton *et al*., 2000), by applying flexible design methods and leaving room for adjustment along the way (de Corte *et al*., 1986), by facilitating self-directed learning (Brookfield, 1986), and through continuous adaptation of the learning programme during its execution (de Lange-Ros, 1999). Poell and Van der Krogt (2003) give a full overview with concrete illustrations of all customisation strategies.

The framework employed in the present study to analyse learning programmes offers HRD practitioners and other learning actors (*e.g.*, employees and managers) a diverse range of context-sensitive action possibilities. Straight or hybrid forms of contractual individual-oriented, regulated task-oriented, organic problem-oriented, and collegial profession-oriented learning programmes can be experimented with in organisational practice. Those who want to offer tailored learning programmes can use such models to both determine their own strategy and better understand other actors' strategies in use.

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